DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 674 EC 303 504

TITLE	Why Educators Support Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities [and] Why Families Support Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities.
INSTITUTION	Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Inst. on Community Integration.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	[94]
CONTRACT	H158K00034
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications Office, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr., S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455 (available in alternative formats).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Civil Liberties; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Motivation; *Personal Autonomy; Responsibility; Self Control; *Self Determination; Self Esteem; *Student Development
IDENTIFIERS	*Self Advocacy

ABSTRACT

Two brief papers provide reasons to support self-determination for students with disabilities, with one paper written from the perspective of educators and one written from the parents' perspective. Each paper discusses 11 benefits of self-determination, including: (1) personal control, (2) motivation, (3) prosocial behaviors, (4) self-awareness, (5) participation, (6) responsibility, (7) independence and interdependence, (8) a vision for the future, (9) self-esteem, (10) self-advocacy, and (11) awareness of rights. Contains a list of 12 suggested resources. (DB)

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Why Educators Support Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities [and] Why Families Support Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

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Self-Determination

Teachers want their students to grow into adults who can take care of themselves. We want students to be able to make good decisions and, as much as possible, be in charge of their own lives. The ability to have control over one's life and make one's own decisions is called *self-determination*. Developing the skills and attitudes necessary for self-determination is important for *all* students. Unfortunately, it is often overlooked for students with disabilities because some adults believe these students cannot make good choices and direct their own lives.

In recent years, educators have found that students with mental retardation, emotional/behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities, at all levels of severity, do have the capacity to exercise control over their lives (e.g. Abery et al., in press; Wehmeyer, in press; Martin & Huber Marshall, in press). To develop that capacity, they may need specific instruction in self-determination skills, such as choice-making, problem-solving, negotiating, goal-setting, advocating, and assertive communicating. It is the role of educators to create the opportunities for that instruction to take place. Why? Because supporting the self-determination of students with disabilities is part of preparing them for adult life. And because, with opportunities to learn and practice, many students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities, can share in these benefits of self-determination:

• Personal Control •

Promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has the potential to increase their belief that events are under their personal control and that they are competent individuals. When students have an increased sense of control and competence, they show improved focus, task persistence, motivation, and subsequent educational outcomes.

• Motivation •

When students with disabilities have opportunities to set personal goals and make choices, they become partners in the learning process. This increases their motivation, directly enhancing the quality of learning within the classroom. Motivated students are likely to increase their participation in academic activities. In addition, difficult to reach students may become motivated to get involved when given opportunities to experience some control over their education.

• Prosocial Behaviors •

Inappropriate classroom behaviors often represent students' most effective means of exercising control over their environments. By teaching students to take charge of their lives and providing them daily opportunities to practice choice-making, self-control, and personal advocacy skills, educators promote the development and use of prosocial means through which to exercise control within the school and community.

• Self-Awareness •

Students can only truly be aware of their capacities and limits through the experience of trying, succeeding or failing, and learning. Students with disabilities are often not given the opportunity to experience this process. Through first-hand discovery of their own capacities, students can understand, adjust to, and accept the challenges imposed by their disability and can better know and build on their talents and strengths.

• Participation •

Self-determination skills directly enhance the capacity of students with disabilities to eventually live independently or semi-independently in the community, maintain employment, and develop circles of friends. When encouraged to take charge of their lives, they are encouraged to live as fully included members of society.

• Responsibility •

When students with disabilities exercise personal control over their lives, they learn to take responsibility for their actions. The best way to teach students about responsibility is to present them with opportunities to make choices and then allow them to experience the outcomes of their choices.

• Independence and Interdependence •

Students who are not given choices learn to be dependent on others. Students who are taught to make their own choices and encouraged to "take charge", learn to make mature, informed decisions. They also learn to receive, as well as give, support to others, becoming an integral part of an interdependent community.

• A Vision for the Future •

Most persons with disabilities are denied the right to dream about their future. Their visions are often determined by others. Enhanced self-determination facilitates student acquisition of the self-awareness, personal advocacy, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills that are needed to create their own visions for their future.

• Self-Esteem •

Enhanced self-determination enables students with disabilities to move beyond simply creating a vision for the future to actually realizing the vision, on their own terms. This experience strengthens students' positive sense of self-worth and self-confidence as they discover their ability to set and meet personal goals.

• Self-Advocacy •

Enhancing the self-determination skills of students with disabilities teaches them to assert their rights, clearly communicate their needs, and become self-advocates. This, in turn, allows them to define their personal visions and advocate for the changes and supports they need to turn their visions into reality.

• Awareness of Rights •

Promoting self-determination enhances the acceptance and understanding of basic human rights for all individuals, including those with disabilities. This provides support for self-advocacy by students with disabilities, and a much-needed lesson for all persons in society.

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Learning to take control of one's life is an ongoing process that involves practice. Students with disabilities learn best when they have opportunities to exercise self-determination skills within their schools, homes, and communities. It is important that we, as educators, collaborate with families and community members to provide those opportunities. For further information on supporting self-determination by students with disabilities in a variety of settings, see the following:

- Abery, B., Rudrud, E., Arndt, K., Schauben, L., and Eggebeen, F. (in press). Evaluating a multicomponent program to enhance the self-determination of youth with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*.
- Abery, B., Eggebeen A., Rudrud, L., Arndt, K., Tetu, L., Borosko, J., Hinga, A., McBride, M., Geger, P., & Peterson, K. (1994). *Self-Determination for Youth with Disabilities: A Family Education Curriculum*. Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
- Abery, B., Eggebeen A., Rudrud, L., Arndt, K., Tetu, L., Borosko, J., Hinga, A., McBride, M., Geger, P., & Peterson, K. (1994). *Self-Determination for Youth with Disabilities: An Individual Skills Curriculum*. Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
- Advocating Change Together (ACT). (1993). *Four Easy Pieces*. 1821 University Avenue, Suite 363 S, St. Paul, MN 55104 • Phone: (612) 641-0297.
- Allen, W.T. (1989; reprinted 1993). *Read My Lips*. Governors Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities, 300 Centennial Building, 658 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55155 • Phone: (612) 296-4018 (voice) or (612) 296-9962 (TDD).
- *Impact: Feature Issue on Self-Determination*. (Winter 1993/94). Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
- *Impact: Feature Issue on Self-Advocacy*. (Spring 1994). Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
- Martin, J. & Huber Marshall, L. (in press). Choicemaker: A comprehensive self-determination transition program. *Intervention in School and Clinic*.
- Mount, B. Zwernik, K. (1990). *Making Futures Happen: A Manual for Facilitators of Personal Futures Planning*. Metropolitan Council, Mears Park Centre, 230 E. Fifth St., St. Paul, MN 55101 • Phone: (612) 646-8342 (voice) or (612) 642-2515 (TDD).
- Wehmeyer, M. (in press). A career education approach to self-determination for youth with mild cognitive disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*.

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Published by the Institute on Community Integration (UAP), College of Education, University of Minnesota. This publication was supported, in part, by Grant #H158K00034 from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. This publication is available in alternative formats upon request. To request an alternative format, or additional copies of this version, contact the Publications Office, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • (612) 624-4512.

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Self-Determination

for students with disabilities • for students with disabilities • for students with disabilities

Self-Determination

Self-Determination

As parents or other caregivers, we want our children to grow into adults who can take care of themselves. We want them to be able to make good decisions and, as much as possible, be in charge of their own lives. The ability to have control over one's life and make one's own decisions is called *self-determination*. Developing the ability to exercise self-determination is important for *all* young people. Unfortunately, it is often overlooked for children with disabilities because of the mistaken belief that they cannot make good choices or direct their own lives.

In recent years, many parents and professionals have learned that children and youth with mental retardation, emotional/behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities, at all levels of severity, do have the capacity to exercise control over their lives. To develop that ability, the young people often need training and lots of practice in self-determination skills, such as choice-making, problem-solving, negotiating, goal-setting, advocating, and assertive communicating. It is important that our homes be places where there are opportunities for that training and practice to take place. Why? Because supporting the self-determination of children with disabilities is part of preparing them for adult life. And because, with opportunities to learn and practice, many children and youth with disabilities, even severe disabilities, can share in the following benefits of self-determination:

• Personal Control •

Promoting the self-determination of young people with disabilities has the potential to increase their belief that events are under their personal control. When children have an increased sense of control and competence, they develop the confidence and ability they need to face life's challenges.

• Motivation •

When young people with disabilities have opportunities to set personal goals and make choices, they become partners with their parents or caregivers in the process of directing their own lives. This increases their motivation to follow-through with decisions and choices because they have had a part in the process. It also lays the foundation for life-long participation in decision-making that affects their lives.

• Prosocial Behaviors •

Inappropriate behaviors often represent a child's most effective means of exercising control over his/her environment. By teaching young people to take charge of their lives and providing them daily opportunities to practice choice-making, self-control, and personal advocacy skills, families promote the development and use of prosocial means through which to exercise control within the home, school, and community.

• Self-Awareness •

Children and youth can only truly be aware of their capacities and limits through the experience of trying, succeeding or failing, and learning. When given opportunities for first-hand discovery of their own capacities, children can understand, adjust to, and accept the challenges imposed by their disabilities, and can better know and build on their talents and strengths.

• Participation •

Self-determination skills directly enhance the capacity of young people with disabilities to eventually live independently or semi-independently in the community, maintain employment, and develop circles of friends. When children with disabilities are encouraged to take charge of their lives, they are being encouraged to live as fully included members of society, both now and in adulthood.

• Responsibility •

When children with disabilities exercise personal control over their lives, they learn to take responsibility for their actions. The best way to teach children about responsibility is to present them with opportunities to make choices and then allow them to experience the outcomes of their choices.

• Independence and Interdependence •

Children who are not given choices learn to be dependent on others. Those who are taught to make their own choices and encouraged to "take charge", learn to make mature, informed decisions. They also learn to receive, as well as give, support to others, becoming an integral part of an interdependent community.

• A Vision for the Future •

Most persons with disabilities are denied the right to dream about their future; their visions are often determined by others. Enhanced self-determination facilitates the young person's acquisition of the skills that support creation of his/her own personal vision for the future.

• Self-Esteem •

Enhanced self-determination enables young people with disabilities to move beyond simply creating a vision for the future to actually realizing the vision, on their own terms. This experience strengthens their positive sense of self-worth and self-confidence as they discover their ability to set and meet personal goals.

• Self-Advocacy •

Enhancing the self-determination skills of young people with disabilities teaches them to stand up for their rights, clearly communicate their needs, and become self-advocates. This, in turn, allows them to define their personal visions and advocate for the changes and supports they need to turn their visions into reality.

• Awareness of Rights •

Promoting self-determination enhances the acceptance and understanding of basic human rights for all individuals, including those with disabilities. This provides support for self-advocacy by people with disabilities, and a much-needed lesson for all persons in society.

Learning to take control of one's life is an ongoing process that involves practice. Children and youth with disabilities learn best when they have opportunities to exercise self-determination skills within their homes, schools, and communities. It is important that we, as parents or other caregivers, collaborate with schools and community members to provide those opportunities. For further information on supporting the exercise of self-determination by young people with disabilities in a variety of settings, see the following:

- Advocating Change Together (ACT). (1993). *Four Easy Pieces (videotape)*. 1821 University Ave., Suite 363 S, St. Paul, MN 55104 • Phone: (612) 641-0297.
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- *Impact: Feature Issue on Self-Determination*. (Winter 1993/94). Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
- *Impact: Feature Issue on Self-Advocacy*. (Spring 1994). Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 • Phone: (612) 624-4512.
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- PACER Center (1994). *Living Your Own Life*. PACER Center, 4826 Chicago Ave. So., Minneapolis, MN 55417 • Phone: (612) 826-2966.

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